DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 349 241 SO 022 462

AUTHOR Gray-Whiteley, Peter
TITLE Anthropocentrism, Schools, and Environment.
PUB DATE Apr 92
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 1992).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Education; *Cultural Influences; Educational Change; Educational Sociology; Elementary Secondary Education; *Environmental Education; Social Change; *Songs; United States History
IDENTIFIERS *Guthrie (Woody); *This Land Is Your Land (Song)

ABSTRACT

An arrangement of Woody Guthrie's song "This Land is Your Land" was recently voted the most popular song among U.S. music teachers and other educators. This arrangement actually includes only three verses of the song that Guthrie wrote as a parody of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America." Guthrie's original song was a radical statement against inequality and dispossession. In the popular arrangement this message is completely lost, and the song is transformed into generalized optimism; we are all secure within wide physical and romantic boundaries and within them we are also all equally free to roam. The transformation of "This Land is Your Land" has resulted in a message that reflects an image of conquering and possessing that is deeply rooted in the U.S. psyche. Threads of fear have been inherited from the initial European invasion of America, and people continue to view their environment as a threat to be neutralized rather than a mystery from which to learn. The school curriculum serves to perpetuate rather than challenge the shaky foundation upon which Americans' image of themselves and their land has been built. (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED349241

Anthropocentrism, Schools, and Environment

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

PETER
GRAY-WHITELEY

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Peter Gray-Whiteley

Graduate Program in Education
Carroll College
Waukesha WI 53186

Symposium on Cultural Dimensions of Environmental Education

American Educational Research Association Conference
San Francisco, April 1992

SO 022 402

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

This paper[1] is in three sections: Song, Conquering, and Curriculum. Its themes are that an ongoing ontological confusion determines our disposition within the environment, that our activity there is predicated on fear, and that--especially in schools--we work to continue this dynamic.

SONG

In the early 1980'S an influential publisher of music textbooks for U.S. schools prepared a centennial edition of songs by surveying "music teachers, classroom teachers, supervisors, and principals" for "their favorite songs--the songs that have been most useful in their classrooms". Over 17,000 responded with this information, and fifty songs were compiled "in the order of their popularity" as the 1985 Silver Burdett Centennial Songbook.[2] The most popular song and first in the collection is an arrangement by Bruce Simpson of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land". Actually, it is an arrangement of a refrain and three verses (only) of the song which Guthrie wrote as a parody of Irving Berlin's "God Blessed America"[3]; the remaining verses are absent. What appeared in the Songbook were the following words:

Refrain This land is your land, This land is my land
From California to the New York island;
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters;
This land was made for you and me.

As I was walking that ribbon of highway,

I saw above me that endless skyway
I saw below me that golden valley
This land was made for you and me.

I've roamed and rambled and I followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts,
And all around me a voice was sounding,
"This land was made for you and me."

When the sun comes shining and I was strolling
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling,
As the fog was lifting a voice was chanting
"This land was made for you and me."[4]

As arranged here these verses both change some spelling and overuse the first person compared to the original. No hint is given that there is more to "This Land...." than what appears in the Songbook.

The handwritten original copy of the 1940 song, which Guthrie annotated as the original along with the words "all you can write is what you see", is somewhat different:

~~God Blessed America~~[5]
This Land was made For You + me

This land is your land, this land is my land
From California to the New York Island
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf stream waters,
~~God blessed America for me.~~

As I went walking that ribbon of highway
And saw above me that endless skyway,
And saw below me the golden valley, I said:
~~God blessed America for me.~~

I roamed and rambled, and followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts,
And all around me, a voice was sounding:
~~God blessed America for me.~~

Was a big high wall there that tried to stop me
A sign was painted said: Private Property,
But on the back side it didn't say nothing--
~~God blessed America for me.~~

When the sun came shining, then I was strolling
In wheat fields waving, and dust clouds rolling;
The voice was chanting as the fog was lifting:
~~God blessed America for me.~~

One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple
By the Relief office I saw my people--
As they stood hungry, I stood there wondering if
~~God blessed America for me.~~[6]

The last verse is struck through in the original, but was part of the radical import of the song which Guthrie feared would be forgotten as he witnessed the song become more and more a patriotic anthem. Against this loss, he at one point insisted that his son Arlo learn these additional verses, with Arlo in turn always ending the 'Private Property' verse with "But on the back side it didn't say nothing/That side was made for you and me".[7]

In the transition from the original song to the Songbook arrangement, Guthrie's impelling complaint against dispossession is turned into a generalized (though curiously vapid) optimism; we are all secure within wide physical and romantic boundaries and within them we are also all equally free to roam. Now this is something of a powerful message, considering it was ranked more useful for classrooms than the messages of ideological standards like "My Country! 'Tis of Thee", "America, the Beautiful", and "God Bless America".[8] Guthrie's angry-joyous intrigue and travel within the shapes and forces of the culture were often quite contradictory, but were nonetheless staunchly counter-establishment. However, with "This Land...." he wrote lines whose resonance with the demonstrably conservative national psyche has been so complete that his antithetical purposes have been completely ignored in the song's arrogation.[9]

CONQUERING

For a moment I would like to deal with what explains the attraction and school-utility of the altered "This Land....", which I shall refer to as 'This altered Land....' [L*]. I suggest the appeal of L* rests in the ancient function it serves, that of supplying the conqueror's constant need for a sense of security and rectitude. In L* not only are we as continuing invaders in touch with and certain and assured of our boundaries--a ribbon of highway from forest to gulf to desert all under our sky--but we have a shared identity in the special material and nonmaterial

claims we have within these boundaries. Wheat fields and dustclouds symbolize our prosperity, and within this prosperity we may effect our presence, roaming and rambling as we will. In this altered land we have established our rights, privileges, powers, and immunities, the hallmarks of property, and we are assured that we will see this more as we stroll further, as our sun shines and we lift the fog by our very presence. As well, the conquering has been achieved equitably, and we all share access to the prize. This is how we like to believe we live, what we most like to teach about ourselves, what we most like to hear our children sing.

The images overall are of ourselves as conquerors-installed, at home amidst the adulation of a voice--that of the conquered land itself--which sounds and chants that it was made for you and me. One is reminded of Richard Drinnon's approving quote from Deloria's God is Red:

> Christian religion and the Western idea of history are inseparable and mutually self-supporting. To retrench the traditional concept of Western history at this point would mean to invalidate the justifications for conquering the Western Hemisphere. Americans in some manner will cling to the traditional idea that they suddenly came upon a vacant land on which they created the world's most affluent society. Not only is such an idea false, it is absurd. Yet without it both Western man and his religion stand naked before the world.[10]

L* is the song of a preferred and ongoing history, its verses those of the required credo. And as propaganda it violates and

caricatures the interrelationships it refers us to. The conqueror as conqueror cannot ever be really at home, but remains an intruder, a dangerous ignoramus whose limited physical and metaphysical insight risks the wellbeing of everyone. (While perhaps accepting some of the metaphysics, Guthrie himself at least reminds us that we are at risk; rather than symbolizing prosperity, wheat fields and dustclouds also augured dustbowls and hunger.)

In the face of a reality which is quite the opposite, a reality in which freedom of movement is severely restricted across huge tracts of the country, in which forests, islands, streams, desert and sky are made increasingly inhospitable for any life (or are annihilated along with that life), in which movement on any of the multiplying, highly regulated highways is enabled only by continuous tribute to destructive fuel- and design-inefficient vehicles manufactured to fail, in which grains themselves are designed not to grow without manufactured chemicals, we promote and prefer the dubious premises of L*. This duplicity begins in the threads of fear inherited from the time of the initial invasion, from the time of the first outposting of an inadequate metaphysical base with its ascription of 'chosen' on an invader ill-prepared for the "new" environment. Alienated rather than chosen, we continue to be deeply uncertain about 'what's out there', about what might happen if we venture beyond what we insistently establish as security against the expanse before us. We are fundamentally frightened,

ambiguous about our presence in a place which we internalize as a threat to be neutralized rather than as a mystery from which to learn. Projecting this ontological fright outward we characterize the spaces, water, life, and growth around us as violent until bridged, spanned, or otherwise removed from our consciousness. We work to proceed as if they are not really there, and when they are not there in any relevant sense, when they are always at remove from us, then the question of our interrelationships with them becomes effectively moot. Secure in a callous dominion and always vigilant for more efficient means of control, we can sing their taming away as cause for celebration.

In this process we become strange creatures, whose interests are predominantly in what we valorize as 'self'-protection established at all levels. For example, even movement itself must be sealed off. We no longer walk, certainly not wildly as a Muir, nor will we model walking to our children. This most basic of creaturely actions has been reduced to an increasingly unsafe inconvenience for the young as for the old (except, interestingly, in the hermetic phenomenon of the mall). We must take a vehicle. At all costs we must stay dry against the rain though it may fall gently and smell and taste sweet, we must stay cool against the heat though it carries the messages of summer, we dare not look too long at the wild storm, and we must soon lose patience with the snow. Our space must not discomfort us in the slightest. And less and less can we stand so much as to be in

each other's space--remotely controlled electro-speak becomes the preferred community. (In minimalist style we drive airconditioned past the homeless to confer and word-process in-depth on the implicates of culture.)

The key point is that, dimly clinging to the invader's metaphysic, we still have no notion of how to be here, except in twisted and distorted ways. We are apart, in but still not of even our immediate surroundings. Walls of rhetoric to the contrary--rhetoric about awareness and sensitivity and planning and preservation--cannot hide the state of affairs in which all aspects of the heavens and earth, rivers, lakes, and finally ourselves are conceived as resources and avenues to manipulate against ontological dis-ease.

CURRICULUM

Perhaps strangest are the postures we adopt in schools, where any sense we may have had that all of the curriculum is immediately about the environment all of the time seems to have been abandoned long ago. As a ruse to deal with a general tremor in the cultural force, establishing or designating separate subunits of school activity as concerned with 'environmental education' reflects well the ambivalence we instantiate about who, what, where, and why we are. (Note the parallel with sub-dividing the mountains, forests, creatures, and rivers--as if this were truly possible--then setting aside subunits called 'wilderness'; what does this say?) Creating separate categories

for thus-objectified concerns, we console ourselves we are dealing with them, moreso if we are 'covering' them in the schools. Yet in the schools we have prioritized what we regard as the intellect, and this preferred template disallows recognition of the expanses we share. Intellect is the defense *par excellence* against taking steps into mystery; we think about, therefore we have acted upon. Reflecting the culture, it overwhelms the imagination and courage of the schools to move beyond a coarse anthropocentrism which simultaneously fears and brutalizes what it fears.

Day to day, curriculum is not shaped around environmental co-process (nor even around more narrow but compelling human-environmental issues such as hunger and lack of shelter). It is overwhelmingly shaped around predatory dispositions toward one another in the service of the (especially male) career pursuit which is its espoused teleology. This pursuit and its outcomes are based on exploitative and cruel emasculation of the landscape and of the neighbor inhabiting that landscape. As a phenomenon childhood is shrinking in the face of the bellicose demands of products which say "without me you are nothing". In the villages of the conqueror children kill each other for jackets not only of the gang but also for the sake of fashion and the status it brings. And in the video games of the mall texts and subtexts are of militaristic and interpersonal violence, with women always as chattels and spoils. We must fight what frightens us for the promise of rewards; alternately, it is our

right to take from the weak. Threaten our accustomed glut of oil and we will kill for the excessive energy-fashions to which we have become accustomed. Curriculum's first duty is to give the assurance that this is how things were meant to be. Our vigilance against encroachment must not flag.

The power of the curriculum is to effect the belief that, unless it serves our nonstop boundary-building, no aspect of the world is of significance except as threat. And the significance to us of any aspect is foremost its utility in disengaging us from the elements constituting that world. Despite what we say, and despite the spectacular techno-artifacts we come up with to do so, this is the realpolitik of a brute survival, of the continued denial of our own being and of that of all things. We remain and oblige our children to remain in the posture of invasion.

Notes and References

1 Thanks to Colleen Bell, Carolyne White, and George Gagnon for their comments on what follows.

2 Silver Burdett Centennial Songbook: 1885-1985 Silver Burdett, 1985, ppii-iii.

3 On this, see Joe Klein Woody Guthrie: A Life Alfred A. Knopf, 1980, p276.

4 Songbook pp2-3

5 This phrase was written then struck out (as here) in the original.

6 in Klein *op. cit.* p445.

7 *ibid* p437.

8 Songbook piii.

9 This is especially interesting in terms of the Songbook if we recall that 1983-4-5 were years in which all forms of liberalism (let alone leftism) were under attack.

10 Vine Deloria, Jr., God is Red quoted in Richard Drinnon Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building Meridian, 1980, pxiii.